

**BELSAR'S HILL,
WILLINGHAM,
CAMBRIDGESHIRE**

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Belsar's Hill, Willingham, Cambridgeshire: a survey
by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

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Introduction

An analytical earthwork survey of Belsar's Hill was requested by Cambridgeshire County Council, to provide a detailed record for management and research purposes, and was undertaken by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England during October 1993. Belsar's Hill is a massive sub-circular, univallate enclosure, very well-preserved by fenland standards, which is protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (CAMBS 1). It is conventional to refer to such earthworks as either 'forts' or 'ringworks', and though both terms have connotations which may or may not be appropriate to Belsar's Hill, the former will be used here for convenience. The site lies in an isolated area of pasture, surrounded by intensively cultivated arable land, 1.5kms to the east of the village of Willingham, in the parish of the same name (NGR TL 423 703, see figure 1). The fort is located at about 5m OD, on the southern edge of the fens; the variation in the natural topography around it is today almost imperceptible, but it stands at the tip of a slight spur of 'harder' ground which projects for a short distance northwards into the fens, a distinction which may have been much more apparent in the past. Belsar's Hill has never been excavated, and interpretations of its date and function still rely on the superficial appearance of the earthwork. Early studies assumed Belsar's Hill to be a medieval fortification (VCH 1948, 3), but the earthwork is now generally believed to have originated in the Iron Age (Malim 1992; Evans 1992). The evidence for the dating and development of the site will be discussed below. The important medieval route known as the Aldreth Causeway extended from the tip of the spur across the fenland to Aldreth village. An 18th-century driveway, which continued the line of the Aldreth Causeway and is now called by the same name, bisects the site, dividing the interior into two fields (see figure 2). Both fields have probably been under pasture since the enclosure of Willingham parish in the early 1850s. That the land was previously ploughed is clearly demonstrated by the well preserved ridge and furrow cultivation, which almost surrounds the monument, and lies within its interior.

The preservation of ridge and furrow is relatively rare in Cambridgeshire, and the surviving fragment of an open field system at Belsar's Hill provides a potentially useful comparison with the classic Midland field systems. Historical maps of Willingham parish have contributed to the interpretation of the field systems; particularly useful is the

1841 Tithe Map (CRO 1841) (see figure 3), which shows all the strips in the survey area. The numbers allocated to the strips on this map are used to identify individual strips in the text. As strips were units of tenure they sometimes include more than one 'land' or ridge; the field book accompanying the Tithe Map records the number of 'lands' in each strip.

Description

The Fort

The fort (see figure 2) is sub-circular, 250m by 225m in overall dimensions. Its longer axis is orientated north-west to south-east, and it has an internal area of 2.57 hectares. The ramparts are best preserved along the northern and western sides, where they reach 2m in height, and there is a trace of a berm (a). The southern sections of rampart are much reduced by ploughing, and the eastern section is also disturbed by later activity. The ditch is shallow for most of the circuit, with a maximum depth of 1m, and varies in width between 6m and 12m. The wider eastern and northern sections are particularly steep sided, and may have been recut. The construction of the present Aldreth Causeway, and infilling of the ditch related to it, has distorted the southern section to some extent.

On the eastern side of the fort a broad, shallow ditch (b) curves out from the main ditch. This forms the boundary between Common Hill and Mole Hill Close (see figure 3 for furlong names) and is flat bottomed and waterlogged, like the fort ditch. In the north-eastern sector of the fort a bank (c), 0.5m high and aligned north-east to south-west, crosses the ditch. The causeway on which bank c crosses the fort ditch appears to be too broad to be primarily constructed to carry the bank. It seems possible that this causeway is an original entrance into the fort; the eastern ditch terminal is well preserved, but the western one has been disturbed by the Aldreth Causeway.

On the western rampart lie two mounds with a low saddle between (d); the saddle represents a remnant of the rampart, implying that this gap was not an original entrance. The mounds, which stand 2.2m above the bottom of the ditch, have certainly been deliberately constructed, rather than resulting from natural erosion or ploughing. Both are similar in size and shape, and their regularity can be seen on the aerial photographs (NMR (a)). On the western side of the fort ditch, opposite feature (d), is the start of a low bank (e), up to 0.4m high, which runs northwards across Loose Hill Furlong to join strip 2380, near the corner of the present west field. This is indicated on the 1841

Tithe Map (CRO 1841) as an arable land (strip 2377), which appears to cut across the other lands in the furlong. However, its eroded condition suggests it is a feature of some antiquity. Towards its northern end furrows clearly cut across the bank; further south they are less clear, and rather distorted.

Most of the fort's interior is occupied by Belsies Hill Furlong, some lands of which cross the rampart (strips 2363 to 2367), and continue northwards. The southern rampart has been lowered, and, in parts, almost entirely levelled by ridge and furrow cultivation. Belsies Hill Corner, on the northern side of the fort, includes the highest surviving section of rampart, along the top of which lies a furrow. The eastern section of the rampart stands up to 1m high, and has not been ploughed, but has suffered disturbance from trees and small-scale quarrying. Within this area a level platform (f), 26.0m by 9.0m, has been dug into the rampart, with a neat bank, 0.3m high, along the western side. This would seem to be the foundation for a later structure facing east across the ditch.

The Field System

The 1841 Tithe Map (CRO 1841) provides a detailed picture of land use at Belsar's Hill when the area was still cultivated under the open field system. In 1846 an enclosure act was passed for the parish of Willingham (CRO 1846), the allotments awarded in 1853 (CRO 1853) resulting in considerable changes to the landscape. The 1841 Tithe Map reference book lists field and furlong names, land use and the names of owners and tenants. Though land ownership will not be discussed in detail, it is worth noting that even in 1841 an individual's land was composed of widely scattered strips distributed throughout the five great fields of this open field system. However, there were also enclosures, mainly the result of fenland reclamation (CRO 1841). The 1811 Ordnance Survey draft one inch-map (OS 1811) gives a general picture of the parish, showing that despite fenland enclosure considerable areas were still uncultivated fen. The enclosed fields of the reclaimed areas contrast with the much larger, older furlongs of the open fields on the slightly higher ground.

Most of the RCHME survey lay within Belsies Field, which was under arable in 1841. A small part of the survey area, Common Hill, was part of the Meadow, which was under pasture at this time; no earthworks survived to contradict the suggestion that this fen-edge area had always been common grazing land.

The ridge and furrow has been preserved by pastoral land use since enclosure; beyond the survey area modern ploughing has levelled the ridges which can now only be detected on aerial photographs (NMR (b)). The ridges vary considerably in height and width; in Headway Furlong most are c.18m wide and up to 0.6m high, whereas in Loose Hill Furlong they are c.7m in width and less than 0.25m high. The ridges can vary within a single furlong, notably in Belsies Hill Furlong; the largest lie towards the middle of the furlong, while to the east and west the ridges become lower and narrower. These narrow ridges were probably produced by sub-dividing a broader ridge. Elsewhere in the survey area narrow, split ridges are significantly lower than their broad neighbours, e.g. lands 2347 and 2348 in Headway Furlong, which are little more than 0.1m high. The furlongs generally have well defined headlands, several of which are 0.6m high on average; the most prominent is 0.8m in height, but this formed part of the Aldreth droveway before the Enclosure of Willingham parish. Not all these headlands are contemporary, as demonstrated by the southern headland of Loose Hill Furlong (g) which overlies a headland (h) running perpendicular to it. Other minor features visible in the survey area relate to field tracks, former hedges and animal ponds, many of which are recorded on various maps and aerial photographs (NMR (c), CRO 1793, OS 1888, OS 1902).

Discussion

The Fort

Belsar's Hill has been claimed to be both a medieval and an Iron Age fortification; though the latter interpretation is now generally accepted (Fox 1923; Malim 1992; Evans 1992), it is worth considering both arguments. There may even be a possibility of Saxon or Norse use or re-construction, though it should be noted that Norse defences in Britain are notoriously difficult to recognise (Richards 1991, 22). The siting of the fort in relation to the natural topography may have been significant in the early medieval period, when the Aldreth Causeway extended from the tip of the 'hard' spur across the fenland to Aldreth village. Belsar's Hill was traditionally associated with William I's campaign against Hereward the Wake (Ravensdale 1974, 35), a connection based largely on the fort's strategically dominant position in relation to the southern end of the Aldreth Causeway and the ford leading to the Isle of Ely (Ravensdale 1974, 35). The earliest recorded name of the fort, 'Bellassise' (VCH 1948, 3), which appears in the Hundred Rolls (Ravensdale 1974, 35), and in documents of the Bishopric of Ely dating to 1221 and 1251 (Reaney 1943, 174), is Old French. It has been argued that the fort would not have a Norman name if it were pre-conquest in origin, given the predominance of Old

English 'bury' names amongst prehistoric earthworks elsewhere in the fen-hinterland (Renn 1973, 89; VCH 1948, 3).

Indirect support for medieval activity at Belsar's Hill lies in references to a 'Castle of Alrehede' (an early form of Aldreth, meaning 'landing place where there are alders' - Reaney 1943) and battles for the control of the Isle of Ely between 1069 and 1071. Renn (1973, 89) considers the only two possible sites for this 'castle' to be Belsar's Hill and the square earthwork at Braham Farm, near Ely. However, Braham overlies ridge and furrow and is, therefore, presumably of a later date (Taylor 1974, 59). This might lend weight to the claim of Belsar's Hill to be the site of Alrehede, but it is possible that the wrong area of fenland is being considered. The geographical description of William's attack on Ely in the *Liber Eliensis* is vague, and although the attack may have come from the west it could equally have been directed from the east, where medieval artefacts have been discovered and where the fen was narrower (Blake 1962, lvii).

A brief comparison with ringworks of a known medieval date is informative. Circular ringworks with a single bank and ditch were built in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Clarke 1984, Kenyon 1990, King 1991). They vary in form and size, but do not exceed 110m in diameter, and usually have large defences in relation to their size (King and Alcock 1969, 95). The only known Cambridgeshire ringwork, Bourn Castle (King and Alcock 1969, 111), is 150m in diameter (RCHME 1968, 16). Consequently, in comparison to known medieval ringworks Belsar's Hill has smaller defences in proportion to its enclosed area, which is considerably larger than even the largest known ringwork (King and Alcock 1969, 107). This suggests that Belsar's Hill was not originally built by the Normans, but it is possible that it was adapted by them as a campaign castle; Norman reuse of pre-existing fortifications has been recorded elsewhere (Davidson 1969, 43, Kenyon 1990, 8). The partial breach in the ramparts on the western side of Belsar's Hill (d), with its flanking mounds, may be evidence of reuse, but the date or nature of that reuse cannot yet be demonstrated.

The relatively few known Iron Age forts in and around the fenland appear to have varied so greatly, both in appearance and function, that it is difficult to define any yardstick against which to compare Belsar's Hill (see for example Malim 1992; Evans 1992; Malim and McKenna 1993). Indeed, even those enclosures elsewhere in East Anglia, which seem in some respects to have more in common with the Wessex type-sites and are therefore termed 'hillforts', are distinctly unusual, both as a group and individually (Martin 1991). The fen-edge location of Belsar's Hill, discussed above in relation to the medieval Aldreth Causeway, is common to a number of late prehistoric enclosures, including those at Stonea Camp, Borough Fen and Coveney; it is possible

that the peninsularity of the sites lent the monuments a visual and strategic dominance which the level ground did not (Evans 1992). Indeed, it is possible that the Aldreth Causeway itself originated in the prehistoric period (see below). In terms of form and size, the other known and presumed Iron Age forts tend to be predominantly sub-circular, ranging from 2 to 20 hectares in area, and located on plateaux or on low-lying gravels (Gregory and Rogerson 1991, 69).

One of the closest parallels to Belsar's Hill in form, size and location is the fort at Borough Fen, or Peakirk Moor, (TF 192 073), which was surveyed by RCHME in December 1993 (figure 4 and Oswald 1994). The fort is sub-circular, c.220m in diameter, enclosing an area of 3.8 hectares, and is situated on a gravel spur on the fen-edge at 4.0m OD. Archaeological investigations of Red Cow Drain, which cuts through the Borough Fen fort, revealed ditch sections and evidence for occupation (French and Pryor 1993; Malim and McKenna 1993). The pottery recovered was dated to the third to second centuries BC, and the quantity of occupation debris far exceeded that from comparable excavated forts in Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire, suggesting considerably variability in function (Malim and McKenna 1993). The earthwork was originally less massive than Belsar's Hill, and has been severely degraded by modern ploughing, the rampart now surviving at best as a scarp 1.2m high. The most significant difference is that the Borough Fen fort has a second, outer enclosure, which follows the course of the inner rampart concentrically at an average distance of 28m, and appears, by its precise replication of the course of the inner earthwork, to be contemporary with it. On the northern side of the enclosure, the RCHME survey recorded very slight traces of a possible bank outside the outer ditch, whose existence was first noted by David Hall (1987), but which did not survive in the excavated sections. This, together with the breadth of the space between the inner and outer earthworks, may suggest that the fort comprised two socially or functionally distinct zones. The wide, slightly in-turned entrance through the inner rampart may be similar to the gateway at Arbury (Evans 1992), and in its easterly orientation is comparable to the majority of Iron Age forts and enclosures throughout the country. In Cambridgeshire, Arbury and possibly Sawston (Taylor *et al* 1994) and Wandlebury (Oswald and Pattison forthcoming) may have single eastern entrances. However, the circuit of the ditch at Belsar's Hill appears unbroken, except in the north-east where bank (c) enters Belsies Hill Furlong. This may have been the site of a simple entrance, partially obscured by the later bank (c), which probably originated as a headland. Further disturbance by the Aldreth Causeway makes interpretation difficult, and the identification of an Iron Age entrance must remain tentative. In conclusion, while there are several significant differences between Borough Fen and Belsar's Hill, on balance the similarities suggest that Belsar's Hill is also Iron Age in origin.

The Aldreth Causeway

The Aldreth Causeway is part of a major routeway to the Isle of Ely, which was certainly of considerable importance in the early medieval period (Ravensdale 1974, 22). Finds of Neolithic and Bronze Age artefacts near Aldreth High Bridge (though recovered in the course of dredging and consequently biased in terms of recognition) suggest that the causeway may have originated in the earlier prehistoric period (Fox 1923, 141), like the example at Stuntney, and remained important into the Iron Age and later. The medieval causeway began immediately to the north of Belsar's Hill, and a number of trackways, from Cambridge and elsewhere in the 'hardlands', may have conjoined to cross the fenland at this point. Its importance in the medieval period is demonstrated by the existence of a bridge at the Aldreth crossing of the River Great Ouse; most other crossings in the county, excepting that at Cambridge itself, were served by ferries at this time (Ravensdale 1974, 35).

The post-medieval droveway, also called the Aldreth Causeway, has been confused by some previous authors with the early medieval route. By the end of the eighteenth century, maps record the droveway as discontinuous (CRO 1793 and CUL 1795), suggesting that its use as such may have been intermittent. The maps variously show a track skirting the eastern edge of Belsies Hill Furlong (CRO 1793 and CUL 1795), and running along the bottom of the southern and eastern sections of the ditch (CRO 1841); the post-medieval route could have followed either, or both, of these. The droveway was reinstated as a through-road bisecting the fort by the Enclosure of the parish in the early 1850s. A plan drawn by Henry Dryden in 1838 (NCL 1838) depicts the Causeway cutting across the fort roughly along the modern line prior to the construction of the present track, which would presumably have destroyed evidence of any earlier routeway. However, the plan is far from accurate, and it may be significant that the 1841 Tithe Map shows no indication of this route.

On the 1841 Tithe Map (CRO 1841) the route is shown following the Headway from the south into the fort ditch, which it followed eastwards as far as the eastern side of Belsies Hill Furlong. The route may formerly have continued further round the ditch, possibly exiting along the gully east of bank (c). The broad, flat-bottomed profile of the fort ditch suggests recutting to accommodate the road. This route along the fort ditch would have minimised the loss of arable land; the proximity of the furrow terminals to the edge of the ditch shows no inclination to waste good land. The fort ditch may have been prone to waterlogging and ditch (b) may have acted as a drain to counter this.

By the eighteenth century the Causeway appears to have devolved into a track providing access to Belsies Hill Furlong (CRO 1793, CUL 1795). Bank (c) is probably the remains of this track, the Aldreth Causeway continuing on this line across the fort as far as the ditch. The apparent recutting of the northern section of ditch may suggest other routes, though the steep ditch side could result merely from erosion by cattle. However, the 1793 map (CRO 1793) does show a track round the western section of the ditch.

Bank (e) may also be a trackway. Both the bank (strip 2377) and a land (2923) in Long Stacks Furlong, were called 'Scotch Load', and were owned by Sarah Lack in 1841 (CRO 1841). Eighteenth century maps (CRO 1846 and CUL 1795) show these lands conjoined to form what appears to be a track across the fields and fort ditch, and onto the rampart. The name 'Scotch Load' does suggest a water course and a certain water course west of the village is referred to as 'The Load' (CRO 1841), but the low bank which survives resembles a track rather than a drain.

The maps (CRO 1841, 1846, and CUL 1795) clearly show the bank (e) overlying the ridge and furrow, contradicting the surface evidence of furrows cutting the bank. It appears that the bank predates the ridge and furrow, but after a period of cross-ploughing the bank was reinstated as a track across the fields, and finally as an arable land. The nature and date of this feature may be clarified through excavation.

The Field System

The furlongs surrounding Belsar's Hill are a small remnant of an extensive open field system. It is not possible to date precisely the origin of this field system without extensive research, though a medieval date can be presumed. It continued as an open field system until the local Enclosure Act in 1846 (CRO 1846); the considerable height of the headlands and ridges suggests they developed over a relatively long period (Taylor 1975, 79). The modification of the fort by medieval cultivation is paralleled at the hillfort at Chipping Warden, Northamptonshire (RCHME 1982).

There is also evidence showing that the field system does not belong to a single phase. The sub-division of older, broader ridges into narrower ridges is probably related to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century attempts to increase the amount of grass in open fields by the creation of greensward balks (Hall 1993, 10). In the eastern part of Loose Hill Furlong it is possible that the ridges have been entirely realigned at 90 degrees to the originals; the reorientation of strips to tackle localised drainage problems is found in other field systems (Hall 1987, 52). Several of the furlongs named on the Tithe Map

appear to be sub-divisions of larger furlongs, for example furlongs both north and south of Belsies Way were called Wrangland Furlong, and presumably formed a single furlong before the road was constructed. It is probable that Headway Furlong was, similarly, originally joined to Little Hempsal Furlong, now south of Belsies Way, and that Mole Hill Close was part of Great Hempsal Furlong. The sub-division of long furlongs during the medieval period is known in many areas, and implies that the original layout is of some antiquity (Hall 1987, 46-52).

Enclosures existed within the field system before 1846, and that of Mole Hill Close is an example unrelated to fen reclamation. In the late medieval period certain strips were enclosed to allow the owners freedom to cultivate different crops (Taylor 1975, 113). The Close would appear to have been such an enclosure, and there are further examples in other furlongs around Belsar's Hill. Though the ridge and furrow indicates that the Close had been ploughed, it was recorded as pasture at the time of the 1841 Tithe Map (CRO 1841). The ridges must be earlier than the enclosure of the Close, because many would be too short to plough effectively.

Conclusions

The RCHME earthwork survey has recorded Belsar's Hill fort in detail, enabling the identification of some original features and other later modifications, mostly related to later agricultural use of the site. Comparisons with medieval ringworks suggest the enclosure is not of this date, although the possibility of medieval reuse remains. An Iron Age context for the enclosure seems most likely from the surface evidence, with a causewayed entrance on the north-eastern side of the fort. Other gaps and disturbance to the ramparts are due mostly to the open field cultivation of the area. The post-medieval driveway which is an extension of the early medieval (or earlier) Aldreth Causeway has added to the confusion, since it has variously passed through and around the site. The identification of Scotch Load as a surviving earthwork feature may be of some importance, and further work might reveal the true function, date and history of this feature.

The recent survey demonstrates the relationship between the fort and the later field system. These fields preserve a variety of features demonstrating changes in land use and the structure of the open field system. There are small-scale changes, such as the sub-division of strips, and larger developments, such as early enclosures, the sub-division and reorientation of furlongs, and finally the nineteenth century Enclosure movement which created the present fields and roadways. Belsar's Hill is a well preserved example

of the landscape as a palimpsest of activity of succeeding periods; each period alters existing earthworks, confusing subsequent interpretations.

Survey Method

The surveys of Belsar's Hill and Borough Fen were carried out by Jane Kenney and Alastair Oswald of RCHME using a Wild TC1610 Electronic Theodolite with integral EDM, the data captured electronically on a Wild GRM 10 Rec Module. These data were subsequently transferred to a computer, and a plot at 1:1000 scale was obtained.

A more detailed description of the site can be obtained from the National Monuments Record Centre, Kemble Drive, Swindon, Wiltshire SN2 2GZ, where the full site archive has been deposited as NMR No. TL 47 SW 24 (the fort), NMR No. TL 47 SW 51 (the Aldreth Causeway), and NMR No. TL 47 SW 52 (the field system), NMR No. TF 10 NE 17 (Borough Fen fort).

Acknowledgements

This paper is published by courtesy of the Commissioners, with the aid of a grant from RCHME. Thanks are due to the owner of Belsar's Hill, Miss Ambrose, and her tenants, Messrs Bailey, for permission to carry out this survey. This article was edited by Peter Topping, and the illustrations were drawn by Philip Sinton.

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- NMR (b) NMR 4267/8, 10, TL 4270/14, 16, 31-OCT-88; NMR 2108/1102, TL 4270/5, 24-MAR-82; NMR 605, CPE/UK/2021, frame 4029, 21-APR-47; NMR 554, CPE/UK/1952, frame 4047, 25-MAR-47.

- NMR (c) NMR 744, CPE/UK/2405, frame 4148, 24-NOV-47; NMR 744, CPE/UK/2405, frame 4148, 24-NOV-47; NMR 5155, MAL/68061 frame 068, 12-AUG-68.
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Titles to figures

Figure 1. Map showing the distribution of Iron Age enclosures in Cambridgeshire. (RCHME, Crown Copyright)

Figure 2. Plan of Belsar's Hill Fort surveyed by RCHME. (RCHME, Crown Copyright)

Figure 3. Copy of part of the 1841 Tithe Map, adjusted slightly for direct comparison with figure 2. (RCHME, Crown Copyright)

Figure 4. Plan of Borough Fen Fort surveyed by RCHME. (RCHME, Crown Copyright)